

Dreaming Possibilities: Reshaping Imaginaries with Feminism and Social Change

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Abstract

By using the feminist imaginary as a pedagogical tool for resistance and change, an experience of activism within the university context in Naples, Italy is explored. The article focuses on the potential transformative power of art as catalysis for deeper level emotional and spiritual learning transformation. The aim is trying to inspire critical conversations to rethink spaces and practices that allow community care, and conditions that include authenticity, resonance, reflection, and freedom. Engaging in the arts, aesthetics, and creative practices can contribute to a sense of hope, agency, and possibility with the potential to provide avenues for creative expression and innovation. Sharing narratives of possibility and engagement with the arts can promote community connections. This article highlights the way artistic practices contributed to the creation of a dynamic and inclusive creative landscape that challenges established norms while encouraging creative and critical thinking.

Keywords: Art practices; feminist imaginary; activism; social change; transformative education.

Imagination is one of our most powerful tools. What we imagine, we can become
Robin Wall Kimmerer

Subversive thinking

subversive article

to reopen our depressed collective imagination.

Post pandemic art as living art daily to heal from contemporary alienation.

Dreaming as a method of envisioning beyond what no longer serves us, supporting each other's towards new sites of possibilities.

Co-building: source from which we can change, adapt, and transform.

Transformative opportunities to encounter the “other”

I am on a journey to explore experimental ways of engaging with the world, thinking, expressing, sharing, and transforming through art. Our perception is haunted by the entirety of our experiences, what images reside within our perceptual mechanisms subtly or overtly shaping our figurative imagination? I strongly believe in the subversive power of images beyond imagination to create an emancipative connection with the world inside and around us. Using feminist imaginary as a pedagogical tool for resistance and change, I would like to share some reflections on practice, recounting my personal experience of community and activism. It's a story of hope and possibility, of loss and rage, of struggle and challenge. It is an attempt to promote forms of healing and explore vulnerability as a daily revolutionary act; it is a seed of hope and inspiration. The aim is to inspire critical conversations to rethink spaces and practices that allow community care. The aim is to create environments that nurture both imagination and critical thinking, fostering a more dynamic and creative consciousness along with the educational and transformative potential. The challenge is learning not only to be in spaces but to experience spaces as places of possibility that make it possible to simultaneously satisfy the need for autonomy and community, to feel free and at the same time belong. We need caring environments (physical and feeling dimension) that allow anyone to be without fear, to learn without pressure, to exercise a freedom of being and to express one's own full potential. Art can provide a valuable space to heal from personal struggles and unilinear power. Artistic expression can resist domination or societal hierarchy structures. Spaces can be free from racist, sexist,

patriarchal, homophobic, transphobic and classist thoughts. Art can create a space where it is possible to be vulnerable.

Imagination enables us to embrace alternative realities: open spaces and room for us to appreciate each other and empathize with each other (Thayer-Bacon, 2010, p. 1.) It guides us in fostering empathy through the power of the arts facilitating the creation of new frameworks, seamlessly connecting fragmented elements, and revealing patterns previously unseen (Greene, 1995).

To be enabled to activate the imagination is to discover not only possibility, but to find the gaps, the empty spaces that require filling as we move from the is to the might be, to the should be. To release the imagination too is to release the power of empathy, to become more present to those around, perhaps to care (Greene, 2007, p.4).

How can we try to create such spaces, given the conditions of our environment?

Rethinking spaces (taking account of material and immaterial elements) through new lenses and a collective conversation about how we feel and want to feel in spaces is a starting point. From that point we can learn to express ourselves and connect with each other in more vulnerable and human ways. A systematic change is required from the inside out and from the other way round. Academia needs to explore and address these questions. Research could be more accessible and it could aim to nurture well-being. How can we feed the academia with knowledge that is already there, in the communities?

An institution should not solely be viewed as a place of passage; rather, an institution can be revised as a place that allows the historicizing of experience: a space that invites deep self-reflection, self-awareness, critical thinking, and community care. What power dynamics, constraints, and possibilities, what imagination of institutions have we inherited from the past and how could we envision a deconstruction to make way for spaces and practices that contribute to our well-being?

“A community we can strive for, an ideal democratic community that is always in the making, and in which we feel at home”, states Thayer-Bacon (p.1) by referring to the vision articulated by Bateson (1994) and Greene (1995). Greene emphasizes the significance of recognizing the value of imagination and comprehending its central role in the pursuit of knowledge. A challenge resides in creating learning spaces that engage with individuals' existential narratives and multiple affiliations within institutional and social contexts. Personal experiences can be explored through aesthetic and reflective ways within spaces with which we share psychic and bodily connections. Being present in these sensitive spaces with attention reveals the transformative and authentic, yet multifaceted, power of learning. In this direction, Sheri R. Klein's thinking (2017) aligns in recognizing in encounters with everyday landscape. There is the potential to awaken us evoking experiences of transformative learning.

Klein (2017) proposes a three-step model (*beholding*, *immersion*, and *reflection*) that serves as guidelines for the exploration and interpretation of landscapes supporting the development of awareness. She argues that self-awareness forms an infinite network that is not limited by spatiotemporal constraints defined by a specific learning experience. She discusses how the awareness generated by her personal transformative experience with everyday landscapes has led to the development of deeper emotional and conceptual complexity, including considerations of paradox even within her role as a researcher. Beholding entails pausing to appreciate the beauty and wonder in their myriad forms that surround us in our lives. In a contemporary world replete with distractions, beholding can offer opportunities to focus on the potential of the self, of the others, and of the moment. Beholding can allow us to simultaneously perceive both the small details and the entirety of the whole in her phenomenological inquiry, Klein considers landscapes central to the processes of meaning attribution. Landscapes, therefore, can serve as aesthetic gateways for imaginative, symbolic, and emotional modes of understanding reality. Just as art does, landscapes can invite us to pay attention, requiring receptiveness on visceral, cognitive, imaginative, and emotional levels (White, 2013).

Through reflective engagement with the world, from passive attention to full awareness, something new unfolds. Bateson (1994) refers to it as "the capacity for awed experience of the ordinary" (p. 56). Like Bateson and Klein, Greene (1977) while exploring the concepts of wide-awakeness and full attention to life, writes:

If it is indeed the case, as I believe it is, that involvement with the arts and humanities has the potential for provoking precisely this sort of reflectiveness, we need to devise ways of integrating them into what we teach at all levels of the educational enterprise; and we need to do so consciously, with a clear perception of what it means to enable people to pay, from their own distinctive vantage points, "full attention to life" (p.121).

The need to re-learn how to think about space thus becomes an indispensable key to hopefully leave open new and multiple perspectives for interpretation and discussion. We cannot fail to consider conflict in community, and spaces and practices being negotiated every moment between different beings with different desires and perceptions of what they need. Why is it so difficult to deal with conflict?

It could happen sometimes that we choose to avoid conflict because at stake is our identity, our fragility, and the risk of being left apart. An emancipatory and creative path may leave us wounded sometimes, but we may find more authentic ways of living: "we search, we make mistakes, we learn, we re-invent. Let's do it with love" (Castillo, 2023).

The impact of arts on education, personal agency, and social change

The direction taken by recent studies in the field of education and lifelong learning rejects the notion of emotion as a barrier to reason and knowledge. Indeed, cherishing, deconstructing, and revisiting the role of emotions and intuition in learning processes are vital (Dirks, 2008). Within this perspective is the whole-person approach: learning is reconceptualized in accordance with this comprehensive framework which embraces cognitive, affective, somatic, intuitive, and spiritual dimensions. This approach presents a scenario that acknowledges various modalities essential for transformative processes: both critical reflection and dialogue, as well as purely sensory aspects (somatic, visual, olfactory). Art and creative expression provide avenues for exploring alternative modes of expression and multiple ways of knowing, which may deepen self-knowledge and understanding of others. Lawrence (2005), for example, examines the constraints inherent in traditional ways of knowledge construction within educational contexts. She explores the concept of art as a form of Indigenous knowledge: a way to access latent knowledge and self-discovery. She also highlights the importance of arts-based learning within curricular frameworks and underscores art's potential as a catalyst for social change and for learning from diverse cultural perspectives. Cranton and Lawrence (2009) describe personal transformative stories through photography as a tool that allows one to see the "extraordinary in the ordinary" (p. 314) moving into imaginal, symbolic, and emotional ways of understanding.

A fundamental aspect of creative expression involves the utilization of imagination. As highlighted by Hoggan et al. (2009), engaging in creative expression promotes exploration and experimentation. Imagination acts as a mechanism for envisioning new possibilities and scenarios. Because the arts transcend rationality, they present a variety of opportunities for profound transformative learning experiences to occur.

Simpson (2007) delves into the power of this approach to transformative learning and emphasizes the role of the arts in fostering such learning experiences. In her research she employs collage as a potent tool for arts-based inquiry. Imagination thus acts as a catalyst for transformative experiences allowing us to perceive the familiar, often taken-for-granted, from new perspectives, thereby breaking with the ordinary. Greene (2007) describes it as a "passion for possibility" (p.1), asserting that when we encounter a great work of art, our way of seeing the world widens: we begin to view things as if they could be different.

Hayes and Yorks (2007) instead examine the transformative potential of the arts as a methodological tool for community development and for social change. Key themes include the role of

art as a precursor to activism, its ability to harness conflict and its role in the deconstruction and reconstruction of self and community. Additionally, Lawrence and Butterwick (2007) have drawn attention to the significance of the arts in fostering education for social justice. They conducted a transformative learning study centered on oppression and difference, utilizing arts-based methodologies, highlighting the role of the arts in the processes of imagination and empathetic connection with both personal and collective experiences of oppression. Scher (2007) has synthesized the collective experiences of herself and fellow community arts activists. The dialogue within the inquiry group produced several insights regarding the role of community arts:

1. Community arts establish a safe environment.
2. Art facilitates introspection and contemplation.
3. Art captures historical narratives while also envisioning the future.
4. Art possesses the capacity to foster healing and resilience.
5. Engagement with the arts contributes to community metamorphosis.
6. Art bridges spiritual practices with the realities of everyday life.
7. The artistic process serves as a transformative agent for social change.

Another example that I find quite interesting is Sundus Abdul Hadi's *Take Care of Your Self*. In this work, Abdul Hadi (2020) critically examines the concept of care and its connection to social justice. She explores the role of art in constructing narratives that challenge and address systemic oppression and trauma. Through the exhibit and the book, she connects transcultural artists who engage with the complex issue of intersection of struggle and care. She amplifies the voices of marginalized individuals and underscores the significance of creating brave spaces. Through her exploration, she offers methods for decolonizing care through art and highlights its transformative power. She addresses questions like how museums and galleries can become sites of healing, using art as a transformative practice and a spiritual one too.

The act of creation can be transformative if you allow it to be. So, I encourage you to consider how your acts of care can become positive catalysts for these larger issues of self, community, and the world. It all starts with sharing your story (p.142).

In the following section, I will describe my own personal experience.

Community and collaboration /activism and social change

This story begins with grassroot meetings organized by students, activists and young researchers after a series of recent suicides (spanning from 2022 to 2023) happened in different universities in Italy. Three of them occurred within the university where I pursued my studies, a place that has long symbolized and continues to represent a second home for me. It is the city where I still live and pursue my doctoral research; it is my beloved yet challenging Naples. We felt the need and the urgency to create a student community for mental health, a safe space of care and struggle. By working collectively, we tried to create a space where diverse voices can be heard, fostering a collaborative environment that embraces multiplicity and contradiction, using creativity as a tool for social change. It involved risk-taking and challenges existing power structures but contributing at the same time to the emergence of new possibilities and perspectives. In the initial gatherings there were few participants. The setting was circular and the space-time was dedicated to the expression of personal feelings in any preferred form, whether verbal or non-verbal. At the center of the circle, large white sheets and various materials were provided for writing, drawing, and painting. There was no predetermined structure other than the encouragement to embrace vulnerability and demonstrate care while recognizing and naming the emotions and sensations associated with own experiences as in the technique of *soul work* identified by Dirks (2001).

Some participants etched symbolic words while others engaged in drawing. Some stood up and remained in silence at the center while still others expressed themselves through artistic and theatrical performances. Symbolic language allows for simultaneity bringing together disparate and

separate elements into a cohesive whole, thus facilitating recognition (Lawrence, 2009). Initially, a temporal gap existed between those who stood up to express themselves at the center of the circle, and those who remained seated, waiting, and observing. Afterwards, like in a dance, the cadence between one form of expression and another assumed a faster rhythm creating a collective performance.

Following this, some individuals took the floor to narrate their own stories or express and share feelings of anger, discomfort, and suffering, but also ideas and hopeful aspirations.

In subsequent weekly meetings, we convened to compose a letter addressed to the university Rector and the entire student/academic community, which was subsequently approved and read aloud during classes. Simultaneously, we developed an online anonymous questionnaire focussing on our perceptions of university life, emotional and psychological well-being, presence and/or utilization of university psychological support services, seeking assistance from professionals, and the enduring presence of distress stemming from the pandemic. The questionnaire was disseminated through various social media platforms, employing a QR code integrated into flyers distributed across diverse university campuses and posted on city walls. Additionally, these materials were strategically positioned to optimize visibility. Remarkably, within less than a week, 881 individuals completed the survey. We adopted a name for our group: CSSM (*Comunità studentesca per la salute mentale* - Student Community for Mental Health, Figure 1), initiated an Instagram channel, and established an email address. Our meetings shifted to open-air locations, facilitated by a megaphone due to our increased numbers. Recognizing the constrained time frame and the urgency to present questionnaire outcomes to the university Rector promptly, we convened more frequently to analyze the data, despite ongoing responses to the questionnaire. Given additional temporal flexibility, a heightened methodological precision might have been achievable.

Results: Working toward the university as a learning sanctuary

The data analysis portrays academia as a heedless environment that fails to accommodate the needs of both students and academics. The university environment exacerbates elements of competition, the fear of failure, and the disappointment of expectations, thereby fostering feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. A significant majority (83,2% of survey participants) reported experiencing the need for psychological support at least once; in addition, 51.1% of the participants believe that their emotional and psychological state could be improved, 56% continue to experience a situation of distress that emerged/exacerbated during the pandemic, and 44% are not aware of university psychological support services or consider them inadequate. Additionally, 65% expressed a willingness to engage in grassroots meetings aimed at collaborative sharing, contemplation, imagination, and collective reflection.

In sum, the most prevalent causes of discomfort and distress reported included: competition, individualism, an environment that prioritizes the pursuit of merit and excellence, a sense of personal failure in response to rejection, low grades, or exam deferrals, a demanding pace, performative anxiety, and the imposition of both individual and collective pressures.

The expressed desires encompass addressing structural challenges within the educational system that give rise to profound discomfort, difficulties, and distress. This involves collaboratively constructing an educational framework tailored to the needs of students and all stakeholders. Another suggestion involved creating a new academic journal that would celebrate accomplishments and positive actions. There was a collective call to advocate for a university that recognizes mental health as an inherent right rather than a privilege. The intended haven for knowledge sharing has unfortunately transformed into an environment that induces increasing insecurity, isolation, and the stifling grip of performative anxiety, coupled with the persistent fear of falling short. Some students find themselves categorized as "out of course," while even those who ostensibly "succeed" are burdened by an ongoing dread of "failure" and the apprehension of not meeting expectations.

The university - in all its components - should instead be a safe space, respectful of the diverse individualities, without which it would have no possibility of existence. It should be a place of

gathering and socialization, traversed by those who work and study. It should not be seen as simply an empty building where exams are taken - or pretended to be taken - but as a space lived actively and as protagonists. The university, encompassing all its facets, should ideally manifest as a *learning sanctuary* (Lange, 2009), a safe, nurturing space that respects the diverse individualities of its members, as without such diversity, it would lack the foundation for meaningful existence. It should function as a hub for congregation and socialization.

Dirks also encourages us to consider spirituality in learning as a *soul work*, that is, learning to work with the images that populate our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Beyond either relativism or the search for absolutes, learning can be practiced as a form of spirituality through a lifetime (Bateson, p. 234). Rather than a mere hollow structure where exams are administered, or perhaps feigned, university should be perceived as a dynamically inhabited space, lived actively, with students and academics assuming the roles of protagonists in their collective academic journey.

“Let's break the isolation together to build a university that is a place of care, sharing, and personal and collective growth” stands as our enduring mantra, accompanied by *'di università non si può morire'* (one should not die because of university). What happened next?

After occupying the rectorate several times as “space invaders in the academy” (Ahmed, 2017) we managed to secure an open-door meeting with the Academic Senate to present the demands of Student Community for Mental Health. In the preparatory phase our organization underwent increased structuring with a subdivision into three committees: faculty abuses; meritocracy and the taxation system; mental health and plans for the design and implementation of psychological support services.

The meeting was marked by collaboration between the parties and promises of future interventions within the constraints of possibilities and implementation limitations.

The Student Community for Mental Health constituted a small but integral part, and the national mobilization scenario that unfolded in response to suicide emergencies prompted significant shifts. With Ministerial Decree No. 1159 dated July 25, 2023, the Ministry of University and Research finally issued a NOTICE FOR THE ALLOCATION OF FUNDS AIMED AT PROMOTING PSYCHOPHYSICAL WELL-BEING AND COMBATING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AMONG THE STUDENT POPULATION.

During the *Bassai Dai* festival, in a warm summer week filled with artistic events and discussions on themes such as time, rhythm, and care, CSSM opened the final concert with reflections and contributions on the entire journey, celebrating the initial milestones achieved.

Intersection of feminism, art, and activism

After engaging with Helmore's (2021) reading on extending social justice activism into the realm of the imagination, I reflected on how educational practices and activism can contribute to building new imaginaries working on freedom of the imagination (that accesses all human experience, and rejects restrictions of time, place, or origin) and expression for everyone: imagination about what's possible can have revolutionary consequences.

A movement requires us to be moved, feminist movement depends on our ability to keep insisting on something (Ahmad, 2017, p.5). However, at times, disillusionment, emotional overload, burnout, and disorientation may set in. “Who cares for the carers?” We find it written in the Art for UBI (Manifesto) edited by the Institute of Radical Imagination.

I want to recount two episodes that occurred during the year of activism with CSSM, which reinvigorated energies and imagination in dark moments of overload and disillusionment. The first is represented by a community art trademark during a walk along the waterfront after an almost entirely sleepless night. Large letters on the rocks reflected the message *'still alive!'* (figure 2). This was (created post-pandemic) and served to remind us that we are 'still alive' despite the disruption,

ambiguity, unknowability, risk, and contradictions that mark our era. It's breathing in the pain and a communal healing from collective traumas. It is a dismantling experience of oppression, thus creating a sense of hope and agency. It is an openness towards the sea and new life. In that moment occurred during the Student Community for Mental Health's activism against suicide emergencies it had a profound impact for me. The second episode occurred during the *Non Una di Meno* protest for women's rights (figure 3). The letter, accompanied by CSSM, was read in the streets with an invitation to participate in the assemblies. I felt purple smoke in the air and one manifesto resonating in choirs, on posters, among marginalized voices screaming 'feminism is the cure'.



Figure 17: CSSM

How can artistic practices mitigate and address these phases? Reinfusing with meaning, liberating, and generating new energies, connecting, breathing into one's emotions and bodies. The struggle can be exhausting. The task is learning to stay with the difficulty and to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty (Ahmed, 2017). Engaging in the arts, aesthetics, and creative practices can contribute to a sense of hope, and agency. Such engagement provides possibilities and potential avenues for creative expression and innovation. Such engagement can promote healing. The beauty of sharing narratives of possibility and building community connections can emerge. Through these avenues, individuals and communities can find inspiration and strength to face challenges and envision positive futures. Feminist aesthetic and creative practices actively engage with the complexities of identity, power, and societal structures. By embracing experimentation and unknowability, these practices contribute to a dynamic and inclusive creative landscape that encourages critical thinking and challenges established norms.

Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed. Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible (Ahmed, 2017, p.2).



Figure 18: STILL ALIVE! Naples



Figure 19: Non Una di Meno Protest

Future directions

Continuing to grapple with my identity as both an amateur artist and a research fellow, I find it challenging to resist the separation of art from research and endeavor to integrate them. Despite the evidence presented by the World Health Organization (2019) on the positive role of art on health and well-being, I struggle to witness this integration within educational practices in institutional contexts in Naples. Although there are indications that perspectives are beginning to change, especially concerning museums and associations and heritage sites as centres of transformation, the journey toward a more unified approach remains an ongoing challenge. A call for imaginative capacity is needed starting from learning environments. Barbara Thayer-Bacon (2010) wonders whether schools offer us hope for learning how to attend to the unfamiliar in each of us, so that the unfamiliar becomes a resource rather than a threat, and recognition is possible (p.5). Her hope shared with Greene and Bateson is that schools can help to make our world a better place. There exists a prevalent fear that integrating the arts into our curriculum may compromise excellence, and that embracing diverse expressions may result in disorder and confusion (Greene, 1995).

At the core of the learning process lies the concept of meaning making which the arts help to process facilitating empowerment, self-discovery, healing, and transformation. In Lee and Taylor's perspective (2011), educators should create spaces and conditions in the learning environment that include authenticity, resonance, reflection, and freedom.

How do we design spaces for a shared creation of meaning, spaces to be thought of, to be dwelled into? What practices address and alleviate anxiety about learning and resistance to transformation? How might we build alternative narratives inspired by responsibility and solidarity, by connecting intellect to passion. and produce knowledge necessary for effecting social change? (Minicom & Walters, 2012). Sara Ahmed (2017) discusses how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us, thinking of these experiences as a resource to generate knowledge, how we become inventive, how we create other ways of being when we have to struggle to be?

I explore experiences of being a stranger, of not feeling at home in a world (Ahmed, 2017, p.7).

I used to think that art can bring you out of yourself into a different world; art can make someone who belonged nowhere belong somewhere. Upon deeper reflection I considered that maybe it is not a different world, but we can rather refine our ability to see the world with more nuances by expanding the boundaries between external and internal. In doing so, we discover a possible other world even within ourselves, in the bodies we inhabit, in their possibilities to experience and feel. We might feel a sense of belonging, even if only for a few moments, perhaps nourishing inspiration. Exploring aesthetic experiences can inspire individuals and instill a sense of wonder; as a result, a deeper outlook on life can emerge and alternative ways of being can be explored. Feeling a sense of identity, belonging, and home is a lifelong journey.

Feeling at home in your own body, among people, in the context you live, and with the awareness of being ready to renegotiate desires and needs is an initial step. The core of belonging, identity, and home may change for us over time but I believe that being willing to look for it is a beautiful mission.

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